

Violence  
in the  
Workplace



## **Violence in the Workplace: Coping With Threat & Violence**

From the Web Site of GSA, Federal Protective Service;  
Reformatted slightly for ease of reading

### **Why Threats and Violence Are a Problem**

News stories about violent incidents appear every day on television and on the front pages of our newspapers. Some of these stories capture national or international attention because they are about assaults on United States Presidents, Members of Congress, or other public officials. But countless other Federal Government employees are vulnerable also. These employees are “on the front-line”, dealing directly with the public every day—Social Security claims representatives, Immigration border guards, Internal Revenue Service agents. Because you work for the Federal Government is no guarantee that you’re protected from or immune to threats or violence from “customers” or members of the general public.

People come into our Federal offices because they need our help. And, like customers anywhere, people who need the services provided by the Federal Government can become frustrated and tense. They may be nervous about their first visit to a Federal Government office. Sometimes they don’t understand government procedures and regulations.

When all of these stress factors are combined, a person may commit, or threaten to commit, violence. Unless these emotional, angry, or frustrated individuals are handled properly, they may harm you, themselves, or other customers. Sometimes even coworkers—perhaps under a great deal of stress because of problems at work or at home—may become threatening or violent.

Many experts say there is no sure way to prevent acts of violence in a place serving customers. You, however, as a Federal “front-line” employee, can learn how to recognize the warning signs of a potentially threatening or violent situation and the specific steps to follow if you or a coworker become involved in such a situation. You and your coworkers also need to know about the enhanced security measures your office can adopt to bring your office and building up to higher standards of security and personal safety.

Read this information carefully and discuss the ideas and suggestions with your supervisor and coworkers.

### **What Should You Do?**

The following sections provide three fictional examples to describe the types of threatening or violent behavior that might happen in the Federal workplace. The two “front-line Federal agencies” selected for our fictional incidents (the Retirement and Benefits Administration and the Student Loan Commission) are themselves fictional. However, they represent the kinds of offices where, because of the nature of their work, employees may be vulnerable to threats or violent incidents. The actions and reactions of the Federal employees portrayed are deliberately exaggerated. This is done for emphasis and is in no way intended to represent anyone in a negative manner.

The questions and multiple choice answers, after each example, are designed to help you think about what you should (or should not) do in similar circumstances. In-depth explanations of why each answer is or is not correct follow the questions.

These answers are intended as guides and illustrations—not rules. There may be no “right” answers for a real life situation. But the description of these fictional incidents should help you recognize a potentially threatening or violent individual early enough to cope with the problem before he or she causes harm.

### **Under Armed Threat**

It’s late Friday morning on a hot summer day in a Midwestern city.

The Retirement and Benefits Administration office is filled with customers waiting to file for their retirement benefits and with claimants anxious about their overdue checks. Because of a breakdown in the changeover of the agency’s central office computer, monthly checks have been delayed more than two weeks.

Customer Service Representatives Sally Mason and Becky Gaynor are working the counter this morning, doing their best to explain the delay to the frustrated claimants. Sally is wearing a fancy corsage on her new dress. This is her last day on the job after 30 years of Federal service. Becky is just a newcomer—she started with the agency less than a month ago and is still being trained.

At 11:45, Office Manager Jim Beacon stops behind Sally: “Are you ready for your big luncheon?” he whispers to let Sally know that she can leave the counter when she finishes with her current customer.

Sally notices that her next customer would probably be Bill Webber—he’s already been waiting more than two hours. Webber frequently shows up with one complaint or another and he’s always hard to handle. Sally doesn’t know it, but today Webber is even more upset. Because of the delay in getting his check, his savings are almost gone. His wife can’t find work. He’s desperate and ready to do something drastic to get his money.

The last time he came into the office he actually threatened to hit Sally when she said she couldn’t produce his check. She now wonders if she should have reported that incident. At the time she thought that Webber was probably just having a bad day.

As Sally, Jim, and other office personnel leave for Sally’s retirement lunch, Assistant Manager Jeanne Franklin puts a “Closed” sign by Sally’s place on the counter. Jeanne then tells Becky she’s taking a lunch break in the back office. “I skipped breakfast and I’m starving,” Jeanne says, “I’ll relieve you in a few minutes.”

The office is stifling, Becky wipes her forehead with a tissue and looks over the waiting area. Every seat is occupied and, because it’s lunchtime, even more customers are arriving. Each newcomer takes a number from the counter dispenser.

Becky calls the next number, 24. Nothing happens. She calls 24 again in a slightly louder voice. Still no response. She calls 25. A man and a woman leave their seats and walk toward Becky. The woman hesitates, letting the man move ahead. Becky thinks the man looks familiar, but she’s not sure. She’s startled because his face is quite red and he’s glaring at her.

“I’ve got 24, and I’ve got this, too”, the man growls at Becky while patting his jacket. “Been waitin’ hours in this hellhole,” he says, his voice growing louder and more strident. “This is worse’n the army. This is the fifth time I’ve come lookin’ for my check, and you’d better have a check here for Bill Webber now or else!”

At that, he pulls out a large handgun, points it right at Becky’s face, and shouts, “Don’t anybody move or I’ll blow this woman away!”

### **What Would You Do?**

To prevent violence and injury and to discourage Bill Webber from using his gun, what should you do if you were Becky?

To help avoid such a threatening incident for Becky, her coworkers, and for other customers, what should Jeanne Franklin, Sally Mason, or Jim Beacon have done?

1. When Becky sees the gun pointed at her, she should:
  - a. Shout loudly, “Oh, my god! He’s got a gun! Everybody run for your lives!”
  - b. Grab the nearest telephone and dial 911.
  - c. Freeze in place and do nothing, letting the potential assailant make the next move.
  - d. Look the man directly in the eye. As she explains calmly that everyone’s check is delayed because of computer problems, Becky should press the under-the-counter duress alarm to alert Jeanne Franklin, the Assistant Manager.
  - e. Ask the man to put down the gun and write his name and Social Security number on a slip of paper so she can ask her supervisor to issue an “emergency check”.
2. When Assistant Manager Jeanne Franklin hears the alarm, what should she do?
  - a. Rush to Becky’s side and try to disarm the potential assailant.
  - b. After Becky signals for help, Jeanne should open the office door and look over the situation without alarming the potential assailant.
  - c. Call GSA’s Federal Protective Officers (FPO), the agency’s security guards, or the local police immediately.
3. What should Customer Service Representative Sally Mason have done before leaving for lunch?
  - a. Told Becky to brace herself for Bill Webber, a tough customer.
  - b. Called Bill Webber up to the counter and waited on him first.
  - c. Alerted Jeanne Franklin that Webber could cause trouble.
4. What steps should Office Manager Jim Beacon have taken to prevent this and similar incidents?
  - a. Rescheduled Sally’s retirement party for after office hours.

- b. Made sure two or more experienced clerks were working at the counter at all times.
- c. Consulted the Federal Protective Service, agency security guards, or the local police about what to do if a customer ever becomes violent.

Confrontations with an armed man or woman are the most dangerous of all situations involving violent persons and the most difficult for inexperienced people to deal with. Let's review Becky Gaynor's predicament and find out which answers are correct and why, and why other choices are the wrong ones.

5. When Becky sees the gun pointed at her, she should:
- a. Shout loudly: "Oh, my god! He's got a gun! Everybody run for your lives." No. This is precisely what Becky should not do. Shouts, screams, or panic reactions are likely to frighten an agitated person into taking action that could harm people or destroy property. Instead, remain as calm as possible; saying or doing nothing is better than making a bad situation worse.
  - b. Grab the nearest telephone and dial 911. No. Dialing 911 or any telephone number in the presence of an armed assailant could frighten him or her into using the weapon. From his actions and words Bill Webber wants to scare Becky, not shoot her. If she can stay calm, time is on her side. The longer Bill Webber is kept from doing anything drastic, the less likely it is that he will.
  - c. Freeze in place and do nothing, letting the potential assailant make the next move. Yes. This may be Becky's only practical response. Above all, she should avoid doing anything that could cause the potential assailant to take action. Simply standing still and letting the individual "talk it out" may be all she should do under these extreme circumstances. Becky shouldn't try any heroics that could cause Bill to react violently.
  - d. Look the man directly in the eye. As she explains calmly that everyone's check is delayed because of computer problems, Becky should press the under-the-counter duress alarm to alert Jeanne Franklin, the assistant manager. Yes. Although Becky had been told to use the alarm button, she forgot all about it when she first saw the gun pointed at her. She should keep talking to gain time and calm the gunman. Becky should never feel that she is entirely helpless. She (and all Federal front-line employees dealing with the general public) should have access to a hidden alarm button under the service counter to alert a supervisor or building security.
  - e. Ask the man to put down the gun and write his name and Social Security number on a slip of paper so she can ask her supervisor to issue an "emergency check". Yes. As long as Becky remains calm, it's possible that he may put down the gun. If he does, Becky should never try to be a hero by grabbing the weapon. Instead, she should ask him to wait while she calls her supervisor to help resolve his problem. If he lowers the gun, Becky should call Jeanne on the intercom and mention the prearranged word or phrase ("emergency check") that tells Jeanne to summon the FPS, agency security guards, or local police immediately. (The organization to call depends on what protective services are provided in your building.) Becky should

keep calm until security guards can disarm the man and remove him from the premises.

- 2 When Assistant Manager Jeanne Franklin hears the alarm, what should she do?
  - a. Rush to Becky's side and try to disarm the potential assailant. No. Don't try to be a hero! Such a reckless move could seriously endanger everyone in the room.
  - b. After Becky signals for help, Jeanne should open the office door and look over the situation without alarming the potential assailant. Yes. When she hears Becky's signal, she should carefully open the door and then write down the man's description—approximate height and weight, color of hair and clothing, age, race, and any prominent features. If possible, Jeanne should estimate the number of people in the room. Next, she should quietly close and lock the door to protect herself. (If there is a "safe room" in the office area, she should alert the person who is in charge of the room to be prepared for an emergency.) As soon as Jeanne has assessed what's happening, she should immediately telephone GSA's Federal Protective Service (or the agency's building security guards or the local police). Jeanne should describe the potential assailant, emphasize that he has a gun, and estimate how many people are in the room and where they are—by windows, doors, along the wall. Jeanne should provide as many other details as possible. Jeanne should also give her private telephone number for the FPS or the police to call her back. A word of caution: If Jeanne thinks that opening the door wider to get a better look is too dangerous, she should immediately call the FPS (or security guards or the local police).
  - c. Call GSA's Federal Protective Officers (FPO), the agency security guards, or the local police immediately. Yes. Law enforcement officials can provide the expert assistance Jeanne, Becky, and the customers need. A well-managed office should have an emergency plan that has been developed in cooperation with the FPS, security guards, or the local police so that all employees know what procedures to follow until help arrives.
- 3 What should Customer Service Representative Sally Mason have done before leaving for lunch?
  - a. Told Becky to brace herself for Bill Webber, a tough customer. No. Since Becky is new on the job, Sally should not have expected Becky to wait on him.
  - b. Called Bill Webber up to the counter and waited on him first. Yes. Sally knows from her past run-ins with Bill Webber that he's an excitable, easily agitated person. To avoid further problems with him (and a potentially dangerous situation), Sally should have waited on Webber herself— but only after taking the actions described in "c" on the next page.
  - c. Alerted Jeanne Franklin that Webber could cause trouble. Yes. In fact, Sally should have reported the previous incident involving Webber to her supervisor at the time it happened, rather than excusing his behavior. That way, office personnel would have been better prepared for his next visit. To avoid threats and violence,

front-line employees must always take threats seriously and report them to their supervisors or the Federal Protective Service.

- 4 What steps should Office Manager Jim Beacon have taken to prevent this and similar incidents?
  - a. Rescheduled Sally's retirement party for after office hours. Yes. While retirement parties are morale boosting and fun for everyone, Jim Beacon should have scheduled Sally's party at a time when the office was not open to the public.
  - b. Made sure two or more experienced clerks were working at the counter at all times. Yes. A manager should never leave a new or inexperienced employee such as Becky alone in a public, front-line position. Nor is it good practice to leave only one clerk on duty, especially during the lunch hour when more people are expected to come into the office.
  - c. Consulted the Federal Protective Service, agency security guards, or the local police about what to do if a customer ever becomes violent. Yes. The highest ranking Federal official within the agency or building should work out an emergency procedure plan with GSA's Federal Protective Service, building security guards, or the local police to be followed in dealing with an armed or potentially dangerous individual. Agency officials should also request a GSA Physical Security Survey (see Physical Security in a Federal Front-line Office).

### **Reporting Incidents of Threats and Violence**

The first time Sally Mason (in "Under Armed Threat") was threatened—no matter how "minor" she thought it was—she should have immediately reported it to her supervisor and then called the Federal Protective Service, contract guards, or the local police. Incidents of threats or violence involving co-workers also should be reported—before they lead to a life-endangering situation. In addition, Federal agencies must report immediately any suspicious activities or criminal acts that occur on Federal property. Any incident should be reported to one of the following:

- GSA Federal Protective Service core or satellite control centers.
- FPS physical security specialists or FPS Officers, contract guards, or GSA field office Managers.
- Local police or law enforcement agency—where there is no GSA protective service. (In such situations, the Federal agency also must report the incident to GSA as soon as possible.)

If your agency has its own internal security reporting requirements and enforcement or investigative authority, send the Federal Protective Service an unclassified report describing the threatening, violent, or criminal incident. This is especially important when GSA provides physical security and law enforcement services for your Federal building. GSA will report crimes and incidents of threatening or violent behavior to the regional offices of the GSA Inspector General, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and local police departments—where they have jurisdiction or direct control.

## **Victim Support**

People involved in threatening or violent incidents can suffer adverse reactions to these traumatic events. Becky's experience in having a loaded gun shoved in her face could cause her to be depressed or unable to eat or sleep. That's when she needs the support of her coworkers and supervisor and, perhaps, outside counseling.

A supervisor can recommend counseling for employees who are severely traumatized by an incident, or give them excused time off the job to relax and get over the experience. "Talking it out" with a fellow employee is another way of venting the strong feelings of fear or anger that occur under extreme circumstances such as Becky's.

Supervisors should make certain that the victimized employee does not feel "unprofessional" or take any "blame" for the incident. At the same time, the employee's suggestions in a debriefing about the incident can contribute toward improving physical security deficiencies in the office. A day or two after the incident, when everyone has had a chance to calm down, supervisors may want to have an employee meeting to talk about what happened, how the situation was handled, and how it might have been avoided.

## **When Hostility Turns To Violence**

Francis MacRae arrives at the Student Loan Commission office a little before his 10 a.m. scheduled appointment.

He always tries to be on time for meetings but especially wants to be early today. He's nervous—he's been advised of an audit of his loan-payment record and doesn't quite know what to expect. But his papers are all ready to be examined even though he doesn't see any reason why he has to be here in the first place.

"My name's Francis MacRae," he says to the receptionist. "I've got a 10 o'clock appointment with Loan Officer Albert Barry." "Take a seat", the receptionist, Sarah Hollister, says rather tersely to MacRae. "He's busy right now." Sarah realizes she should have been polite, but she was up during the night with her baby and is really tired.

MacRae sits down and starts browsing through some magazines. Then he gets up and starts pacing back and forth, visibly annoyed at the delay. Hollister is on the phone and doesn't notice MacRae's behavior.

At 10:45, MacRae marches over to the receptionist's desk, glares at her, and asks belligerently, "What's taking so long?" "Several people are out sick today, and Mr. Barry has taken some of their appointments," she replies. "He should be free soon."

A few minutes later, Barry walks into the waiting area, calls MacRae's name, introduces himself, and escorts MacRae to his desk. But just as MacRae takes his seat, Barry's supervisor asks if he can see him for a moment.

After Barry leaves, MacRae turns to Mary Anne Smythe, who has a desk next to Barry's. "My god," MacRae says to Smythe, "I've been kept waiting all this time and now this guy walks off and leaves me sitting here!" MacRae gets up and starts walking back and forth between the desks, swearing to himself. Smythe assures him that Barry won't be long.

When Barry returns, he pulls MacRae's file from a folder. Just then, Barry's



telephone rings and he takes a call lasting several minutes. Extremely irritated by now and starting to perspire, MacRae loosens his collar. Barry completes his phone call. Then he asks MacRae for his papers, scans them, and asks MacRae about the six months in 1994 when he made no payments.

By now, MacRae's face is red and his hands are shaking. He grabs his papers from Barry and shoves them into his briefcase. "I'm not going on with this forced audit!" MacRae shouts. "I was out of work. I've resumed my payments. What more do you want?"

Mary Anne Smythe, meanwhile, is becoming concerned about MacRae's agitated state and leaves the room to tell their supervisor about the situation.

Barry remains calm. "Mr. MacRae," he says in a firm voice, "your repayment schedule was based on equal monthly payments over 10 years. Missing six payments disrupts the repayment schedule and increases the amount of interest due on the loan. There may also be a penalty involved."

As Barry tries to explain the rules on loan payments to MacRae, Smythe reports to Supervisor Harry Waxton that the customer with Barry is becoming agitated. Smythe then returns to her desk and overhears MacRae shouting at Barry.

"Why should I pay a penalty when the Government wastes more money in a minute than I make in a year?" MacRae shouts.

"Mr. MacRae," Barry replies, "if you refuse to pay what you legally owe, the Government can take action to place a lien on your assets to recover its money."

The idea of legal action and people knowing about his finances is too much for MacRae. He jumps up, reaches across the desk, and yanks Barry up out of his chair. "Why, you little punk, I'll show you!" MacRae screams.

### **What Would You Do?**

To avoid a violent confrontation if you were Albert Barry, Receptionist Sarah Hollister, Mary Anne Smythe, or Supervisor Henry Waxton?

1. What should Loan Officer Albert Barry have done to prevent such violent behavior by Francis MacRae?
  - a. Called MacRae before the interview to explain what happens during an audit.
  - b. Suggested that MacRae hire an accountant or attorney to help with the audit.
  - c. Started the meeting on time and avoided any interruptions during the meeting.
  - d. Stopped the interview as soon as MacRae raised an objection.
2. How should Receptionist Sarah Hollister have treated MacRae when he came into the office?
  - a. Greeted him courteously and explained that Loan Officer Barry would be delayed for a few minutes.
  - b. Interrupted Barry and told him that his 10 o'clock appointment was waiting and becoming anxious.

3. When Mary Anne Smythe realized that MacRae was upset, what should she have done?
  - a. Gone to Barry's desk and tried to defuse the situation.
  - b. Called the FPS Officers or local police immediately.
  - c. Notified their supervisor, Henry Waxton, about MacRae's agitated behavior.
  
4. After Smythe alerted Henry Waxton that a customer was acting in a belligerent manner, what should Waxton have done?
  - a. Immediately approached MacRae and told him if he didn't calm down, Waxton would call the police and have him arrested.
  - b. Called the FPS officers immediately. Now, let's review Loan Officer Barry and MacRae's situation to find out which answers are correct and what is wrong with those that are not.
  
5. What should Loan Officer Barry have done to prevent such violent behavior by Francis MacRae?
  - a. Called MacRae before the interview to explain what happens during an audit. Yes. Barry should have called MacRae and carefully explained why MacRae was being asked to come in for an audit of his payment record.
  - b. Suggested that MacRae hire an accountant or attorney to help with the audit. Yes. Barry should have told MacRae this when Barry called him to explain why he was being audited.
  - c. Started the meeting on time and avoided any interruptions during the meeting. Yes. By leaving the room and taking a phone call after starting the meeting late, Barry added to MacRae's concern and anxiety.

Note that Barry failed to respond early to MacRae's agitated state—his perspiring and red face, his shaking hands. These are often the first warning signs of a person who could become threatening or violent. This is the time to remain calm and explain to the customer what the procedures are and why they are necessary. If the customer is still agitated, it may be necessary to call a supervisor over to talk to the customer. In an extreme case, alert a coworker to have the supervisor call the Federal Protective Service or the security guards.

d. Stopped the interview as soon as MacRae raised an objection. No. Most verbal objections, however unusual or even irrational, don't lead to physical or verbal violence. But Barry should have carefully and calmly explained, at the beginning of the interview, why MacRae had been asked to come in for an audit.

When Barry tells MacRae that he could face a lien if he doesn't proceed with the audit, MacRae's violent reaction was almost certain. Barry could have advised MacRae that refusing the audit would waste time, cause extra expense in court costs and attorney fees, and create more anxiety and tension until the matter was resolved.

6. How should Receptionist Sarah Hollister have treated MacRae when he came into the office?

a. Greeted him courteously and explained that Loan Officer Barry would be delayed for a few minutes. Yes. The receptionist is usually the first person customers meet and may set the tone for interactions with other people. A receptionist should be courteous to everyone—but should stay alert and notice the actions of any customer in the waiting area.

In offices where customers have appointments, service representatives should consider giving the receptionist a list of customers and appointment times each morning. As the day goes on, the receptionist should be immediately notified of any changes or delays so customers can be told when they first arrive.

b. Interrupted Barry and told him that his 10 o'clock appointment was waiting and becoming anxious. Yes. When Hollister noticed that MacRae was getting impatient, she should have alerted Barry (or one of Barry's coworkers) and asked him to come talk to MacRae.

- 7 When Mary Anne Smythe realized that MacRae was upset, what should she have done?
- Gone to Barry's desk and tried to defuse the situation. No. She should not become involved directly in her co-worker's dealings with an agitated customer.
  - Called the FPS Officer or the local police immediately. No. Smythe should follow office procedures and immediately tell her supervisor what's happening.
  - Notified their supervisor, Henry Waxton, about MacRae's agitated behavior. Yes. This is the standard procedure for this office.
- 8 After Smythe alerted Henry Waxton that a customer was acting in a belligerent manner, what should Waxton have done?
- Immediately approached MacRae and told him that if he didn't calm down, Waxton would call the police and have him arrested. No. Threatening MacRae with arrest would be the worst thing to do and would only cause him to become more violent.
  - Called the FPS officers immediately. Yes. If the customer has become extremely agitated, the supervisor should notify the FPS (or building security guards or the local police) immediately.
- The supervisor should give the FPS officer a brief explanation of what has happened to cause the problem. The customer should be accurately described, and the exact location of the office and building should be pinpointed. If there is a "safe room," the supervisor should tell the FPS officers how to get to the "safe room" without being seen by the customer.

### **Telephoned Suicide or Bomb Threats**

From time to time, Federal offices receive telephone calls from someone who threatens to commit suicide or who says a bomb has been planted in a Federal building. What should you do? How do you handle these calls?

Print out the following card summarizing what you should do. Read and think about the procedures. Carefully tear out the card and tape or staple it to the inside front cover of your telephone directory—or put the card in another handy place where you can easily refer

to it. Review the card frequently.

Everyone in your office, including supervisors and managers, should follow these same procedures. Make copies of the card if you need to so everyone will have his or her own.

## **REFERENCE CARD**

### **TELEPHONED SUICIDE OR BOMB THREATS**

1. Keep calm. Keep talking.
2. Don't hang up.
3. Signal a coworker to get on an extension.
4. Ask the caller to repeat the message and write it down.
5. Repeat questions, if necessary.
6. For a bomb threat, ask where the bomb is and when it is set to go off.
7. Listen for background noises and write down a description.
8. Write down whether it's a man or a woman; pitch of voice, accent; anything else you hear.
9. Try to get the person's name, exact location, telephone number.
10. Signal a coworker to immediately call the FPS, a contract guard, or the local police.
11. Notify your immediate supervisor.

### **ANGRY OR HOSTILE CUSTOMER OR COWORKER**

1. Stay calm. Listen attentively.
2. Maintain eye contact.
3. Be courteous. Be patient.
4. Keep the situation in your control.

### **PERSON SHOUTING, SWEARING, AND THREATENING**

1. Signal a coworker, or supervisor, that you need help.
2. Do not make any calls yourself.
3. Have someone call the FPS, contract guard, or local police.

### **THREATENING WITH A GUN, KNIFE, OR OTHER WEAPON**

1. Stay calm. Quietly signal for help.
2. Maintain eye contact.
3. Stall for time.
4. Keep talking—but follow instructions from the person who has the weapon.
5. Don't risk harm to yourself or others.
6. Never try to grab a weapon.
7. Watch for a possible chance to escape to a safe area.
8. Use a duress alarm system or prearranged code words.

U.S. General Services Administration  
Federal Protective Service,  
18th & F Streets, NW, Rm. # 2341  
Washington, D.C. 20405  
Tel: (202) 501-0907  
Fax: (202) 208-5866

## **Obscene, Harassing, or Threatening Telephone Calls**

Obscene and harassing callers are primarily interested in generating fear and discomfort. The longer they keep you listening, the more satisfaction they derive from the call. Some experts say that the person who uses the phone to verbally harass or embarrass is not likely to follow up with a direct confrontation.

If obscene or harassing calls continue, keep a written record of the day, date, and time; the type of voice (male/female, pitch, and accent, if any); background noise; what was said; and whether the person gave a name. Then ask the Federal Protective Service for help.

The caller who makes personal threats to you or your family is another matter. Any threatening call should be reported to GSA's Federal Protective Service, agency contract guards, or the local police immediately.

See the printout card listing suggestions on dealing with telephoned suicide or bomb threats. This card should be printed and then kept near your office telephone for quick reference.

## **When Employee Relations Go Wrong**

Aaron Brunner, a computer programmer with a Federal Government agency, is running late for work again. He was drinking heavily the night before, got into an argument with his wife, and only got a couple of hours sleep.

Traffic into the city is really backed up and Aaron arrives at his office 25 minutes late. What's worse, he was to meet with his supervisor, Jennifer Mason, at 9:00 sharp to go over his annual performance review. But Aaron isn't too concerned—he knows he's in line for a promotion.

He saunters into Jennifer's office, sits down, and ignoring the "no smoking" regulations, lights a cigarette.

Jennifer notices the dark circles under Aaron's eyes, his trembling hands, and his forehead gleaming with perspiration.

She's perplexed. After three years' outstanding service, he's been late for work several times over the past six weeks and has phoned in sick on the last four Mondays and Fridays. Coworkers have complained that he gets into petty arguments with them over nothing.

"I appreciate all the hours of voluntary overtime you've put in to meet our tight schedules," she says. "But I'm puzzled by the sharp decline in your performance, your excessive tardiness, even this morning. You call in sick a lot, you take extra long lunch breaks, and frankly the work you've been handing in recently is either delivered late or its incomplete and has to be done over. You get into arguments with other employees and you appear to have a drinking problem."

Aaron is totally caught off guard by Jennifer's frank accusations. In his tired and distraught condition he overacts: "She's not going to promote me," he thinks. "She's going to fire me!"

Aaron lights another cigarette, blowing the smoke directly at Jennifer. His eyes dart back and forth. His lips are dry, and his face is flushed. To Jennifer's amazement, Aaron abruptly starts pounding his fist on her desk. "This is the worst job I've ever had!" he screams. "You aren't gonna promote me! You want to fire me!"

"Why, no, Aaron," Jennifer says. "Why would I want to fire a badly needed programmer? Please stop and think a moment—I don't want to fire you. But we must solve some of these problems. We can't allow your absenteeism and sloppy work to go on."

But Aaron obviously isn't listening. "You're always complaining about my work and sneaking around to check up on me," he shouts. "You don't appreciate all the good work I've done for you. Everybody in the office is against me, including you. I might as well quit."

Totally exasperated, Jennifer loses her temper. "Okay, Mr. Brunner, if that's how you feel, go ahead and quit. You come in late all the time, you cause all kinds of problems in the office, you're not worth promoting. You're not even worth talking to! Get out of my office before I throw you out!"

Aaron loses all control. Yelling obscenities, he jumps up from his chair and starts toward Jennifer.

What would you do? If you were Jennifer Mason, what should you have done to prevent Aaron's violent reaction? How can Jennifer turn the meeting around and get Aaron to discuss his tardiness and poor job performance?

1. When Aaron Brunner arrives at Jennifer Mason's office late and with a hangover, Jennifer should have:
2. Rescheduled the interview.
3. Postponed the annual performance review but discussed Aaron's tardiness and other work-related problems.
4. Anticipated trouble and suggested that a third party be invited to the meeting.
5. When Aaron lights the first cigarette, Jennifer should have:
6. Let him smoke.
7. Told Aaron that Federal rules prohibit smoking and he must put out the cigarette.
8. When Aaron shouts that he wants to quit his job, Jennifer should have:
9. Kept calm and let Aaron continue to talk.
  - b. Stopped the meeting and given Aaron the rest of the day off.
  - c. Listened to Aaron briefly, and then discussed his job performance and behavior problems and what can be done to help him improve.

Now let's review Jennifer and Aaron's situation to find out which answers are correct and what is wrong with those that are not.

1. When Aaron Brunner arrives at Jennifer Mason's office late and with a hangover, Jennifer should have:
  - a. Rescheduled the interview. No. Jennifer needs to find out what's troubling a valued employee and how, by working with him, she can help Aaron get back on track.
  - b. Postponed the annual performance review but discussed Aaron's tardiness and other work-related problems. Yes. Based on Aaron's attitude and behavior at the meeting, the annual review might only result in some form of disciplinary action. Instead, Jennifer needs to have an open discussion with discreet, but probing, questions to get the information she needs to recommend counseling. She should be conciliatory but firm in telling Aaron that his absenteeism, his poor job performance, and his argumentative behavior cannot continue. If she hasn't done so previously, she must tell him that unexcused tardiness, poor performance, and abuse of sick leave privileges could be grounds for a formal warning and, ultimately, demotion or dismissal. However, she should assure Aaron that she wants to help him find alternatives that will provide solutions to his problems.
  - c. Anticipated trouble and suggested that a third party be invited to the meeting. No. This would only serve as a threat to Aaron and let him know that Jennifer is unable to cope with Aaron and his problems herself. But, if Aaron doesn't respond to Jennifer's suggestions and seek counseling, she may want to have another supervisor at the next meeting. (And, if his problems remain unresolved, Aaron may want to think about bringing a third party, such as a union representative, to any follow-up meetings.)
2. When Aaron lights the first cigarette, Jennifer should have:
  - a. Let him smoke. No. This undermines Jennifer's authority as a supervisor and lets Aaron take over the meeting. Besides, smoking in Federal Government offices is not permissible, except under certain circumstances. Jennifer is responsible for reminding Aaron of this regulation.
  - b. Told Aaron that Federal rules prohibit smoking and he must put out the cigarette. Yes. By requiring Aaron to put out the cigarette, Jennifer stays in control of the meeting and keeps it open for needed discussion.
3. When Aaron shouts that he wants to quit his job, Jennifer should have:
  - a. Kept calm and let Aaron continue to talk. Yes. Instead of becoming angry herself, Jennifer should try to calm him down so she can try and get him to talk about his problems. She then must decide whether to refer Aaron to the agency's personnel office. That office can tell Aaron about various alternatives—counseling, medical examination, or a private organization such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Jennifer may first want to talk to the personnel office herself and ask for suggestions in dealing with Aaron's problems.
  - b. Stopped the meeting and given Aaron the rest of the day off. No. This would reward bad behavior and prevent needed dialogue. Jennifer would definitely give up her control as supervisor and Aaron would feel he could outbluff her.



c. Listened to Aaron briefly, and then discussed his job performance and behavior problems and what can be done to help him improve. Yes. Obviously, Jennifer should have been aware of Aaron's problems long before this meeting and met with him to discuss his deteriorating performance, absenteeism, and sick leave record. Because he had established a good work record, such a significant drop in his performance should have been the first warning sign.

Now, she and Aaron must work up a plan of action, with a specific timetable and a commitment from Aaron to carry through on his plan. Aaron must report his progress at agreed upon intervals of no longer than once a week and Jennifer must maintain a serious interest in and concern for his welfare and his return to his excellent level of job performance.

### **Coping With Stress**

Job-related stress will never be eliminated, but it can be managed. If you're feeling stress constantly, or frequently "blowing up" for no reason, you should discuss the problem with your supervisor or with a counselor.

Many times, problems at home go with you to the office. Or your office itself may be causing you stress—a personality conflict with a co-worker, a heavy workload with no time off, or a noisy or disorganized environment.

If the problems cannot be resolved, you may want to think about transferring to another office or to another type of work.

Perhaps your supervisor can arrange for a room where you and your co-workers can "get away from it all" by taking short breaks. If you can't get away from it all at work, allow extra time by getting up earlier so you don't have to rush around to get to work on time.

Physical exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress. Try walking or jogging before or after work or at lunchtime. Take up a hobby or try volunteer work in the evening or on weekends.

### **Federal Employee Assistance Programs**

Free, voluntary, and confidential short-term counseling is available for Federal employees through employee assistance programs sponsored by all Federal Government departments and agencies. Counseling is usually offered on a variety of problems: family and marital crises; mental and emotional stress; child or spouse abuse; problems with children; care of elderly or infirm relatives; money and credit management; and alcohol and drugs.

To find Federal employee assistance programs, contact the personnel office in your agency or call the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Employee Health Services Branch, at 202-606-1269.

If you require long-term counseling, you can usually find help in the community where you live through city, county, or State offices or through church or private organizations. Look in the government sections of your telephone directory for "health," "social services," or "counseling" and in the yellow pages for church or private organizations.

